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SOVIET APPREHENSIONS ABOUT SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1971-74\*

by

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Since 1970 at least two schools of thought have emerged in Moscow about the implications for the USSR of America's new policy toward China. One is relatively sanguine; the other, quite apprehensive. By examining these Soviet viewpoints, we may gain additional insight into the future of American China policy. Some Soviets apparently do not object to the recent improvements in Sino-American relations in part because it seems impossible to them that Peking and Washington will ever achieve any substantial degree of political rapprochement, let alone any anti-Soviet cooperation. Some Americans may share this view. Two articles in *National Review*, for example, have advocated an arms'-length American policy toward Peking characterized by coolness and caution because the Chinese Communists are too unstable to do "serious business" with the United States. From the Soviet perspective, cool but correct Sino-American diplomatic relations are scarcely cause for alarm.

The second Soviet school, however, seems deeply troubled by the general trend toward Sino-American friendship evident since 1971. Soviet authors have explicitly warned the American government that to become too friendly with Peking may well endanger Soviet-American

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\* This paper was presented by the author to the Air University, Montgomery Air Force Base, Alabama, in September 1974.

détente. This Soviet view may also have an American counterpart. For example, in 1973 a *New York Times* column assessing Sino-American relations contained the comment, "In essence, a political foundation has been laid for a possible future Chinese-U.S. alliance against the USSR." A year later, a Soviet author cited this same sentence as evidence of the sinister anti-Soviet objectives of America's new approach toward China.

In the face of Soviet secrecy we cannot hope to know which of these two schools influences Brezhnev, Kosygin, Gromyko and Grechko. Certainly, the highest Soviet leaders have closely monitored the development of Sino-American relations. They have probably considered the potential threat to the USSR of any kind of alliance between Peking and Washington. By 1975, however, earlier Soviet apprehensions may have diminished because of frequent Western media reports about a cooling off in Sino-American relations. Two events strengthening this view were the Chinese cancellation of the scheduled visit of a performing arts troupe to the U.S. and President Ford's reaffirmation, after the fall of Indochina, of the American commitment to defend Taiwan.

Nevertheless, the Soviet leaders could hardly become complacent about the future of Sino-American relations as long as almost total secrecy continued to surround Henry Kissinger's many meetings with Mao Tse-tung, Chou En-lai and Teng Hsiao-ping. In fact, one Soviet diplomat told me he feared the devious Chinese had actually been the sources of false information about this "deterioration" in Sino-American relations just to render Soviet leaders complacent about long-term Chinese plans to cooperate with the United States for anti-Soviet purposes. Although many Americans would dismiss such Soviet fears as misdirected paranoia, Soviet newspapers, magazines, and radio broadcasts have long featured stories purporting to describe secret Sino-American collusion against the Soviet Union. As bizarre or even preposterous as it sounds to Americans, the Soviet media have reported joint operations by CIA and Chinese intelligence, secret meetings between Kissinger and Chou En-lai to divide the world into spheres of influence, and a budding Sino-American military relationship directed against the USSR.

How reasonable are these Soviet allegations? Can anyone in Moscow seriously believe that Maoist China and Republican America could link up to oppose the USSR? These questions may best be approached through Soviet eyes. After a brief review of what the Soviet media has been saying, we need to appreciate how Soviet memories of American military and economic support for Tito's Yugoslavia after 1949 may affect perceptions in Moscow today about Sino-American détente. Finally, we can examine the hypothetical advantages and disadvantages to the United States that would come from pursuing the kind of military and intelligence cooperation with China that Moscow alleges has already begun. Clearly, in this heuristic exercise, if the costs outweigh the benefits and the gains do not justify the risks, we may conclude that Moscow has nothing to fear.

In 1973 the Soviet Union began asserting that China had proposed a military relationship to the United States. In December, a Singapore newspaper mentioned this possibility for the first time, and the story was immediately carried in the Soviet press. Soon afterwards, the Japanese *Kyodo* news agency correspondent in Moscow reported that reliable sources had disclosed the details of a Chinese request for American military equipment. According to this article, Premier Chou En-lai supposedly asked Secretary of State Kissinger for 20 jet fighters during their Peking meetings in November 1973. When *Newsweek* then carried a story attributed to sources close to Kissinger that Peking had requested American tanks, military transport aircraft, and armored personnel carriers, Moscow again showed intense interest in several radio broadcasts. For example, a broadcast in English to North America warned that:

...reports of Peking's interest in American supplies of arms reflect the desire of the most reactionary militaristic circles in the United States to support the aggressive hegemonic aspirations of the Mao group. These circles would like to cash in on the openly hostile attitude of the Chinese leadership toward the Soviet Union and the socialist community as a whole.

One unofficial Soviet broadcast went further by stating that the United States had actually set up a tank factory and a helicopter assembly plant in China.

For no publicly apparent reason, the Soviet media soon began to accuse the Chinese leadership of actively seeking and receiving support from the CIA. One broadcast cited an article in *Far Eastern Economic Review* stating that Chinese diplomats in Vienna had visited a branch of Radio Free Europe to gather CIA material about domestic oppression in the USSR.

Other Soviet broadcasts accused Peking of conspiring with the CIA in South Asia to carve a new state out of Bangladesh and India by supporting the Naga insurgency in the area and to overthrow the government of Nepal.

Early in 1975, a signed article in *USA* magazine by a Soviet China scholar again warned the United States against providing military assistance to China.

I personally presume that all these Soviet allegations are untrue, but it is easy to appreciate how memories of American aid to Yugoslavia could affect Soviet perceptions today. A Chinese proverb cautions, "Once bitten, Twice shy." It was over twenty-five years ago in mid-1949 that Washington went to Tito's aid when he was threatened by Soviet invasion. Within that year, President Truman and Dean Acheson quickly arranged development loans, an export license for a steel finishing mill, and diplomatic support for Belgrade's bid for a Security Council seat in the UN. Despite the prevailing atmosphere of militant anti-Communism, Truman released \$16 million of Mutual Defense Assistance funds to Yugoslavia which he justified to Congress in November 1950 as "help to preserve the independence of a nation which is defying the savage threats of the Soviet imperialists, and keeping Soviet power out of one of Europe's most strategic areas." Within a few weeks, Congress passed the Yugoslav Emergency Relief Act authorizing an additional \$50 million of economic and military assistance. Less than two years earlier, Yugoslavia had been perhaps

the most pro-Soviet of all the Communist-dominated nations of Eastern Europe. One can imagine Soviet surprise at these dramatic and surprisingly quick reversals of U.S. diplomatic and defense policy.

It was apparently not easy to initiate these policy shifts. In his memoirs, Acheson notes that he had to personally take charge of Yugoslav policy during this period because of the sensitive issues involved and the need to handle Congressional opponents who believed "Communists belonged to a genus without subordinate species." Acheson also overcame opposition in the Pentagon. It seems the Yugoslavs were understandably reticent about telling the American military about their own existing stockpiles and how and where they intended to fight the Soviets. Acheson quips, "This sort of thing was the life-blood of Pentagon bureaucrats. My view was that the Yugoslavs were wise to be reticent, that they knew best what they needed and would put it to good use...."

Intelligent observers of the Soviet Union may protest at this point that Russian analysts surely would not overlook the obvious distinctions between U.S. aid for Yugoslavia in 1949 and Sino-American collusion against the USSR in the 1970s. Yugoslavia's expulsion from Cominform had occurred just four days after the beginning of the Berlin airlift -- not in a period of Soviet-American détente. More importantly, Yugoslavia is a small, non-industrial power without the capacity or ambition to challenge the Soviet Union. At most, the Yugoslavs could only aspire to delay briefly or deter marginally a Soviet strike. Moreover, Belgrade possessed neither nuclear weapons nor the intention of developing them. The People's Republic of China, on the other hand, is large, potentially threatening to the Soviet Union, already possesses dozens of nuclear missiles and jet bombers, and may intend to expand its challenge to Soviet influence on a worldwide scale.

To Americans, for President Ford and Secretary Kissinger to replicate the Yugoslav policy of Truman and Acheson with respect to China may seem impossible. But Soviet estimates of how U.S. policy is made do not proceed from the same perceptual basis. A Soviet China specialist told me that one aspect of the Yugoslav/China analogy that does fit is wartime

contingency planning. After all, a striking degree of military (and presumably intelligence) cooperation did develop between Belgrade and Washington in the early 1950s. After a small American Military Assistance Advisory Group was established in Belgrade, the military assistance program reached a total of \$500 million by 1955, largely for purchase of American tanks and jet fighters and modernization of ground forces. The U.S. Army Chief of Staff visited Belgrade, and later there were consultations at the general staff level between the two military commands. Eventually, the Yugoslav general staff also engaged in consultations with their Greek and Turkish counterparts about modes of defense against Soviet invasion. This sort of Sino-American joint military planning apparently is quite plausible to some Soviet observers.

Even if the U.S. ever wanted to initiate a military relationship with China, there is still the other side of the question. Would China be willing? Superficially, one might assume that rigid Chinese ideologues would prefer a continuation of present policy or even a rapprochement with the Soviet Union rather than accept military aid from the American capitalist devils. Yet the Chinese have ideologically categorized the USSR for many years as a capitalist state -- more precisely, a formerly socialist country which has restored capitalism -- with even greater imperialist ambitions than the U.S. Moreover, Peking has called for the overthrow of Brezhnev who is likened to Hitler, but not the American government. What motives might impel Peking's leaders to seek Western military equipment, defense technology and intelligence?

China has been warning its population for nearly six years of the danger of a Soviet surprise attack, so one obvious motive would be to provide a quick fix for the relatively inferior Chinese army, navy and air force in an effort to deter a Soviet invasion. There are two ways a Chinese military relationship with the United States could aid in deterring the Soviets. First, by upgrading their warfighting capabilities with American equipment of the types already mentioned in the Soviet stories -- jet transports, armored personnel carriers, tanks, jet fighters -- Peking will marginally raise the costs to Moscow of an

invasion of China. It seems unlikely, however, that China could afford the kind of massive arms purchases that would be required to establish even a degree of either strategic or conventional military parity with the Soviet Union. Expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars of scarce foreign exchange for American military equipment would not be as advantageous to Peking as a second type of deterrence which is much cheaper: whether or not the U.S. actually grants any Chinese military requests in peacetime, Peking could significantly affect Soviet calculations about the degree of Western support China may receive in the event of Soviet attack.

As long as Sino-American relations remain cool and distant, it may be assumed in Moscow that Peking would neither ask for nor receive military support from any outside source after a devastating Soviet conventional attack or a disarming nuclear first strike. But open publication of Chinese requests for U.S. military equipment would change this hypothetical strategic debate in the Soviet general staff. The fact that the Chinese have made such requests in peacetime implies that they might make similar requests again in the event of a Soviet attack. Soviet military planners would face a new uncertainty: the likelihood of wartime Western aid to China. Furthermore, it is quite possible that the Chinese may find methods -- such as giving misinformation to Soviet clandestine sources -- to convince Moscow that American military and intelligence support to China has been promised in the event of a Soviet surprise attack.

Two other possible Chinese motives may be mentioned. One plausible Chinese motive may be to play upon the conspiratorial instincts of Soviet analysts. Because Chinese propaganda has consistently lambasted "collusion" between the United States and the USSR, it is reasonable for Moscow to attribute to Peking the desire to "spoil" improved Soviet-American relations. In fact, Soviet broadcasts in 1975 accused Peking of seeking to provoke war between Moscow and Washington. One way to generate Soviet-American friction would be for Peking to leak stories -- perhaps through intermediaries -- to create the impression in Moscow that a Sino-American military relationship exists.

In the second place, Chinese requests could be part of a long-term program to exploit any available foreign technology by collecting technical information, samples and limited numbers of prototypes to aid native Chinese military design and production. In other words, recent incidents which may have appeared to Soviet intelligence collectors as Chinese "requests" of an anti-Soviet nature may represent only a kind of organizational inertia or the ongoing implementation of standard operating procedures developed in the 1960s after the Soviets refused to continue selling advanced military equipment and technology to China. In the future, Soviet diplomats may again misinterpret hearsay inadvertently generated by low level officials in Peking and in Chinese delegations overseas who are merely sounding out Western firms about technical details and purchasing possibilities without signalling any desire to form an alliance with Western powers.

What kinds of factors have Soviet analysts probably taken into account in estimating the likelihood of a Sino-American military relationship? Three advantages may be pointed out that would accrue to the United States.

- 1) An American military relationship would serve as a concrete reward to the pragmatic Chinese policy of establishing working diplomatic relations with the United States, a policy which may fall under attack within China. More specifically, a U.S. military assistance and sales program in Peking would begin to involve the influential Chinese defense establishment in the new diplomatic relationship with the United States by giving the Chinese military a stake -- defense technology -- in preserving good relations with America.
- 2) American arms and technology transfers to China may aid in deterring a Soviet attack or further Soviet military pressure on China, forestalling a future Sino-Soviet war which could jeopardize world peace. Certain improvements discussed below in Chinese strategic forces could reduce the risk of Sino-Soviet nuclear war and insure a more stable nuclear balance without significantly increasing the Chinese strategic threat to the United States.

- 3) Increased Chinese military capabilities, especially if deployed forward near the Sino-Soviet border, could induce increased Soviet deployments to military districts on the Chinese border, thereby temporarily tying down a greater percentage of Soviet ground, naval and air forces. Increases in Chinese military forces will bring corresponding decreases in Soviet forces available for combat against U.S. allies.

These general advantages of U.S. strategic sales to China could be maximized while minimizing negative consequences by giving export licenses to U.S. private corporations only for sales of defensive or passive military systems to China. Defensive or passive weapons systems can be defined in a variety of ways, but two relevant examples would be a military reconnaissance system and a phased array or Over-the-Horizon (OTH) radar. These systems might provide strategic and tactical warning to Peking's highest military authority for command and control of nuclear forces in the event of a Soviet surprise attack. Although China is already constructing a weather satellite system and a phased array radar that may be ready within a few years, U.S. technology transfers to these two projects could permit significantly earlier completion dates.

Moreover, if China genuinely believes its own propaganda statements about the urgent necessity of preparing for a Soviet surprise attack, then Peking may be interested in acquiring a "hot line" capability to receive American tactical warning of Soviet missile or air attacks. The present arrangement of Liaison Offices in Peking and Washington probably does not allow the kind of rapid data link transmissions of advanced warning required to give Peking time either to

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\* Otherwise expressed, Soviet military planners presumably allocate a certain portion of their strategic and conventional forces to be "withheld" from combat against NATO as insurance against the contingency that a Chinese attack could open a second front. The size of this Soviet "China withhold" force is probably related to Soviet estimates of what prudence requires to deter Chinese attack or, if deterrence fails, to defeat it. American-assisted expansion of Chinese warfighting capability thus increases the Soviet "China withhold" force. Approximately one fourth of the Soviet army, navy and air force are already located near China.

begin slowly fueling its liquid-fuel missiles or to permit launching of its jet bomber nuclear retaliation forces. Without this warning, Chinese liquid-fuel missiles at "soft" launch sites will remain vulnerable to Soviet disarming first strikes.

A U.S. strategic relationship with China, limited to this type of passive, defensive military technology, might bring some of the general advantages listed, at minimal damage to Soviet-American relations. For example, a Soviet-American "hot line" at least theoretically capable of providing warning to the USSR already exists. A parallel American arrangement with China could hardly provoke Soviet charges of American favoritism toward China. Since the USSR already has powerful phased array and OTH radar and advanced satellite reconnaissance systems, American policy could remain "evenhanded" by supplying China only with systems carefully chosen to be of no interest to the USSR, but still beneficial to China's more backward radar and satellite programs.

An additional advantage may stem from sales of strategic and tactical warning systems to China because of the crisis instability of the Sino-Soviet nuclear balance. A grave Sino-Soviet political crisis akin to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis might induce Peking to alert its strategic missiles and launch its strategic bombers. Without a tactical

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Unless the Chinese missile sites or the Chinese missiles and their nuclear warheads are hidden from Soviet satellite reconnaissance and are therefore able to ride out a nuclear attack. Even if this were the case, the Chinese may be uncertain about how many of their sites remain unknown to Soviet intelligence or invulnerable to heavy Soviet ICBMs. Soviet espionage activities in China exposed by Peking in January and March 1974 may have had the objective of locating Chinese missile sites, missiles, and warhead storage centers in northern Manchuria and northern Sinkiang near the Soviet border. Peking announced in January that the espionage activities of Li Hung-shu were centered near the Manchurian cities of Mu-tan-chiang and Chia-mu-szu. These two cities are possible choices for Chinese medium range missile sites to threaten the major Soviet Far East cities of Vladivostok and Kharbarovsk. If Moscow could acquire by espionage a list of all Chinese missile sites and their precise geographic coordinates, the effectiveness of Peking's nuclear deterrent would be sharply reduced. China would then be more vulnerable to a successful disarming first strike. It is interesting to speculate that when Lin Piao fled to the north, he perhaps carried not only transcripts of the Kissinger-Chou En-lai conversations, but also a map of Chinese nuclear sites.

warning capability, the Chinese would have to keep their liquid-fuel missile force in a condition of high readiness, a dangerously destabilizing act that provides incentives to Moscow to strike first. The Chinese would also have to consider a first strike before their forces were destroyed on the ground by a precisely timed Soviet preemptive disarming strike. With reliable tactical warning, however, Peking would be less inclined to fuel its missiles in a crisis and could rely instead on its recallable manned bombers as a second-strike force. A guarantee of fifteen minutes warning time, combined with runway alert procedures for the Chinese bomber force, would improve the stability of the Sino-Soviet strategic balance. In addition, timely and imaginative American crisis diplomacy via hot lines to Peking and Moscow (which they do not have between them) might damp down dangerous Sino-Soviet hostilities.